

The Blackwater Chronicle: An Essay in Appreciation of Philip P. Kennedy's Book

By William S. Osborne

Interest in little-remembered American authors is often revived whenever scholars and critics of our literature find something to value or appreciate in their works. Such an interest has recently been satisfied with an edition of the writings of the artist-essayist David H. Strother, who published numerous essays in the 1850's under the pen name Porte Crayon.¹ Strother is credited with writing realistically about the western Virginia wilderness when the tendency among writers was to describe the rural scene in romantic terms; and one of the most enjoyable of his essays, "The Virginian Canaan," is a factual account of a fishing trip he had taken with friends into the wilderness in the early summer of 1852. As I read "The Virginian Canaan" once again, I was reminded of the little book which probably suggested the idea for the essay—*The Blackwater Chronicle* [1851], by Strother's friend and neighbor, Philip Pendleton Kennedy. Kennedy's book, also an account of an "expedition into the Alleghany country . . . to harry its streams for trout," is a curious "chronicle"—a record of high adventure and good-natured raillery among the author and his friends, supplemented by careful descriptions of the wilderness and bits of learning which Kennedy had got from his reading. Long passed over by our literary historians, it deserves to be remembered, like Strother's essay, as a factual—and lively—report on travel in the wilderness.

The Blackwater Chronicle is the narrative of a trip five "adventurous gentlemen" (Kennedy and Strother among them) took to the Blackwater region in the early summer of 1851—"a country," Kennedy described, "flowing with wild animals, such as panthers, bears, wolves, elk, deer, otter, badger, etc., with innumerable trout." He wrote the book shortly after he returned; and sometime in the early fall of 1851 he asked his brother, John Pendleton Kennedy—the Baltimore writer who had already gained a modest reputation with his books about Southern life, where he might send the manuscript. When he suggested Rufus W. Griswold, Kennedy wrote the editor asking him (somewhat cavalierly) to publish it in the *International Monthly Magazine*.

I have . . . in hand, a narrative of a trip to the Blackwater, in Randolph Co. Va. in the heart of the Alleghany Mountains—a trip made by myself and some other gentlemen last June. A country called Canaan—a wilderness of some 40 miles more or less in extent, into which no known man had yet penetrated far, we entered—caught trout in such abundance that it ceased to be sport—slept on hemlock and fir tree branches—saw deer every now and then in numbers, and had the bear and the panther, the wolf, the elk, the otter, etc etc, all around us—

¹ David H. Strother (Porte Crayon), *The Old South Illustrated*, ed. Cecil D. Eby, Jr. (Chapel Hill, 1959).

explored the falls of The Blackwater, where that stream pitches down some six or seven hundred feet in the space of a mile etc etc:—This narrative have [sic] some amusing adventure in it—reciting and describing the things said and done by the *dramatis personae* of the expedition; and which, you will perceive, couldn't help but be pleasant to read about (if well told), when I inform you that these gentlemen thus cast out into the wilderness, were of somewhat dainty and luxurious life and conversation—and that part of the time they were lost—and that one—and that they were *all tattered and torn*, and some of them a little *forlorn*:—these forlorn, ever and again overheard bewailing their misery, and lamenting their wives & children, etc; and all this, in such good set phrase, as would have adorned the civilisation of London or Paris, but was rather *Hebrew Greek* to the tribes around—the bears, the panthers etc etc, who have not now, as of old they once enjoyed, the gift of tongues, and most certainly do not understand English any more than a Frenchman. . . .

The Blackwater Expedition, it seems to me would be just the thing for the International,—Mr David Strother . . . lives by me,—was one of our party—and if worth while, he would illustrate. . . .²

Since Griswold did not encourage him, Kennedy made inquiries to other editors. He was apparently successful, for his brother noted in his journal, in the spring of 1852: "Pent and Strother returned last night from N.York. Pent says he has made some arrangements with the publishers there to bring out [the] little work of his."³ Strother had gone along, possibly to see that his illustrations were included in the "arrangements." Whatever reason for further delay in publishing the book (a year was to pass), *The Blackwater Chronicle* was ready for the press before a second trip to the Blackwater region by Kennedy, Strother and their friends was taken—the one which Strother wrote about in "The Virginian Canaan."

It is perhaps important that the student and the historian of American literature recognize Strother's account of "a sojourn in the wilderness . . . [into] the Canaan country" is too close to Kennedy's not to have been modeled after it. Fishing jaunts to the Virginia mountains by the same sportsmen may not vary greatly from one year to the next. What happened in 1851 will in all probability happen again in 1852. The weather in fact was bad both years: rain drenched the men nearly every day. Only the desire to explore the "noble forests" in 1851 and a determination to fish the Blackwater near "the Falls of Canaan" in 1852 prevented the adventurers from turning back. There would then be similarities in the two narratives, but Kennedy's book doubtless prompted Strother to write his essay.⁴

² Letter dated Nov. 28, 1851, in the Griswold Collection, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

³ John Pendleton Kennedy, "Journal July 14, 1851-June 1, 1852," entry dated May 1, 1852, in the Peabody Institute Library, Baltimore, Maryland.

⁴ Mr. Eby writes in his Introduction to *The Old South Illustrated* that Washington Irving was responsible for Strother's writing "The Virginian Canaan." Irving with John Pendleton Kennedy and Philip Pendleton Kennedy had been Strother's guests at Berkeley Springs, Virginia, in the summer of 1851. Strother may have derived his pen name from Irving, since—as Mr. Eby points out—Porte Crayon is the country cousin of the more serious Geoffrey Crayon; but he derived the plan and method of "The Virginian Canaan" from *The Blackwater Chronicle*.

Although Kennedy extolled the beauties of the Virginia wilderness with romantic delight, he gave realistic details to his description of life in the woods—recounting the incidents of camp life, providing carefully etched portraits of guides and backwoods characters, enumerating the hazards of travel through the rugged foothills of the Alleghenies. Frequently he used dialog and anecdote to point up the misfortunes of the gentlemen “lowlanders.” With his friend’s book clearly in mind, Strother wrote a shortened version and called it “The Virginian Canaan.” He too employed realism to describe travel in the woods, and his characters indulged in mock theatrics to amuse themselves and the readers. While no one in Kennedy’s story was singled out for special consideration,⁵ “X.M.C.” in “The Virginian Canaan” attracted Strother’s humor. A novice in the woods, X.M.C. tried to “[brave] the impropitious elements unflinchingly” but encountered all sorts of ill adventures, some reading like Singleton Ogelthorpe Swansdown’s misfortunes in John Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn*.⁶

The Blackwater Chronicle was published in the fall of 1853, preceding “The Virginian Canaan”—the lead article in the December issue of *Harper’s*—by only a month or two. And now one of those ironies which sometime happen to writers occurred. Not only did Strother’s essay appear in a medium more agreeable to the reading public, but Kennedy’s book was immediately pronounced his brother’s work. “We . . . could lay our hands directly upon the head of this ‘Clerke of Oxenforde’ [the pen name Kennedy had used],” Simms wrote confidently in the *Southern Quarterly Review*, “whom we take to be a generous and impulsive Southron—a Marylander—whom we have long known as the possessor of talents which he himself has too little valued. . . . But we will not point him out to the inquisitive. . . .”⁷ With Simm’s review the error was established—to persist until recent years—that John Pendleton Kennedy was the author of *The Blackwater Chronicle*. Thus, circumstances seemed to combine to rob Kennedy of a popularity he might have won as the author of his book.

A third circumstance Kennedy may have supplied himself—the barrier (some might call it that) he put between his readers and his book. The style of *The Blackwater Chronicle*, though sometimes brilliant, was often flamboyant—suggesting a certain verbal nimbleness but wearying when too many “good set phrases” tumbled onto

⁵ Only the misfortunes of the author “Triptolemus Todd, Esq.” are mentioned briefly. Todd (i.e., Kennedy) had once shot himself in the knee while hunting partridges, a fact— he explained—which might “account for his lameness in these pages.”

⁶ Swansdown was deliberately led into the marshes adjacent to the farm by a “friend” and left to mire there, as X.M.C. is guided into swampy thickets by his companions. Like Swansdown, the “ex-Member of Congress” is of a somewhat delicate and effusive nature and frequently the butt of jokes by his comrades. Strother could have had Swansdown in mind as he filled in the portrait of X.M.C. because he had not long before reread *Swallow Barn* and completed a series of drawings for the 1851 edition of John Pendleton Kennedy’s book.

⁷ See Cecil D. Eby, Jr., “John Pendleton Kennedy Was Not ‘X.M.C.’” *American Literature*, XXXI (Nov., 1959), 332-334, for other information.

⁸ William Gilmore Simms, “The Blackwater Chronicle,” *Southern Quarterly Review*, XXV (Jan., 1854), 268-269.

the pages or his imagination skipped too cleverly among the myths of romance.

. . . it seems to me now, when I revert my thoughts to that morning's exploration of the Blackwater, that all the divinities of old fable must have had their dwelling-place out there; that surely Pan and Fannus dwelt in those wilds; that Diana lived there, and Latmos, on whose top she nightly kissed the boy Endymion, was the mountain that bordered the Blackwater; that Venus—she of the sea—Anadyomene, sometimes left the sea-foam and reposed her charms in the amber flow of the river; that Diana the huntress, with all her attendant nymphs, pursued those beautiful deer I saw; that the naiads dwelt in the streams, and the sylphs lived in the air, and the dryads and hamadryads in the woods around; that Egeria had her grotto nowhere else but in the Canaan—all the beautiful creations of old poesy . . . were around me in the unknown wild.

Kennedy frequently "plays with his subject," Simms observed, "as a zephyr with its wing, and flies with most capricious and pleasant fancy, over the fields of the new Canaan. . . ." An archromanticist himself who enjoyed "old poesy," Simms felt that the reader's "thirst" would be well quenched by "waters" so "delicious."⁸

Regardless of "extravagances" of style, Kennedy did take pains to describe the wilderness vividly, to make the scene real for his readers.

. . . perhaps in all this broad land of ours, whose wonders are not yet half revealed, no scene more beautifully grand ever broke on the eye of poet or painter, historian or forester. The Blackwater here evidently breaks its way sheer down through one of the ribs of the backbone of the Alleghenies. The chasm through which the river forces itself thus headlong tumultuous down, is just wide enough to contain the actual breadth of the stream. On either side, the mountains rise up, almost a perpendicular ascent, to the height of some 600 feet. They are covered down their sides, to the very edge of the river, with the noblest of firs and hemlocks, and as far as the eye can see, with the laurel in all its luxuriant growth—befitting undergrowth to such noble growth of forest, where every here and there some more towering and vast Balsam fir, shows his grand head.

His use of description particularly "delighted" his brother. "It is so joyous and so fresh with the finest artistic tints. . . ." John Pendleton Kennedy wrote in his journal. "The expedition to the Blackwater is so graphically described, that I suspect the reader of this book has not the best part of the enterprise."⁹ Readers might well endorse the brother's estimate of the book, if they could get beyond the "fancy" which sometimes cluttered its pages.

Indeed, Kennedy's indulgence of his "fancy" could explain the indifference shown the book. In an intimate, somewhat old-fashioned style, he apparently wrote more to please himself than his readers—a fatal mistake, so his brother had discovered when he followed his antiquarian interests in *Rob of the Bowl*. Reading tastes were

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁹ John Pendleton Kennedy, "Journal July 18, 1853-June 30, 1854," entry dated Nov. 13, (1853).

changing. The informal essay, which exhibited an author's whimsical humor, pretty sentiments and facile phrase, was not as popular as it was when the *Sketch Book* was published; even Irving, the acknowledged American master of the essay, had largely discarded it for historical and biographical narrative. American book buyers in the 1850's—those who were reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for instance—wanted something more substantial than an author's account of his peregrinations.

There were other factors too which worked against Kennedy and his book. It is obvious as one reads the narrative that the outdoor life of a Virginia gentleman was far more congenial to him than the serious business of writing. He was well known in the Martinsburg area as a sportsman, and his friends in the Valley were quick to grant his skill with rod and rifle. A lawyer by profession, he lived well beyond the income received from a small patrimony and his attorney fees. Since his brother had earned several thousand dollars through the sale of his books, Kennedy hoped that writing might become a profitable pastime for him as well. But a genial disposition too easily swayed by friends and the promise of adventure offered writing too much competition.¹⁰

However, an evening spent in reading *The Blackwater Chronicle* demonstrates Kennedy's facility with his pen. The writing is virile in spite of the idiosyncrasies of style, and the amusing and realistic account of the "expedition" into the wilderness is still delightful to read. His picture of travel in the mountains suggests that he could have turned his talent to other stories with even better success. Yet the times, circumstance, even his own inclination seemed not to urge him to further writing. Since *The Blackwater Chronicle* is a travel narrative, a genre of questionable importance today, it may never be republished. In justice to Kennedy, though, it ought to be remembered for its graphic description of the western Virginia wilderness, for its sprightly account of life in the woods—and even as the literary source for Strother's "The Virginian Canaan."

¹⁰ His brother had frequently urged him to write, as one way of providing "a nest egg, however small. . . for future use. . . to finish a good article every fortnight, and (thus) make some six or seven hundred dollars every year. . . ." "Letters of John Pendleton Kennedy 1849-1851," letter dated Sept. 28, 1850.
Because of his brother's temperament, John Pendleton Kennedy did very little to help him find a publisher for *The Blackwater Chronicle*—although he had been instrumental in getting Poe's early stories published and acted as agent for Philip Pendleton Cooke's *Froissart Ballads*.